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Great Lakes - St. Lawrence River Water Levels

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... a monthly bulletin from Canadian Hydrographic Service

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August Precipitation Over the Great Lakes

As a percentage of the long-term August average:

Great Lakes Basin	64%
Lake Erie (including Lake St. Clair)	34% **
Lake Superior	88%
Lakes Michigan-Huron	54%
Lake Ontario	80%

** Record Low

Note: These figures are preliminary.

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Level Continued to Rise Despite Maximum Possible Outflow

High Lake Superior Water Level a Concern

During August the International Lake Superior Board of Control allowed maximum possible Lake Superior outflows to counter the rising level on that lake. Despite these efforts, the lake's level continued to slowly rise during most of the month.

In recent issues, we have discussed the ongoing major repairs at the Compensating Works located in the St. Marys River above the rapids. To ensure worker safety, it was possible to use only three of its 16 gates to release water from Lake Superior. Thanks to an early completion of the repair to the Canadian half of the structure, two more gates were opened on August 22, bringing the total Lake Superior outflow closer to, but still slightly less than the amount specified by the regulation plan.

In an effort to increase the Lake Superior outflow, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers opened one of its navigation locks at Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan on August 12. However, concerns about the potential for major structural damage to the lock gates necessitated termination of this action later in the day. As an alternative, small flows were passed through ice and tainter gates that form part of the U.S. Government power plant.

Low Levels on Lake St. Lawrence

The control point for Lake Ontario regulation is the hydropower dam in the St. Lawrence River. High flows through the dam during the last three months caused a decline in levels on the upstream side of the dam, leading to very low water levels in the river between Cornwall and Iroquois, an area known as Lake St. Lawrence. In contrast, one year ago when Lake Ontario levels were below average and flows at the dam low, Lake St. Lawrence had above average water level conditions.

Water levels in Lake St. Lawrence in early August were as much as 45 cm below seasonal average. To help alleviate the problems faced by recreational boaters on Lake St. Lawrence, the International St. Lawrence River Board of Control has agreed to reduce the flows at the dam. While the improvement has been marginal, the Board's action has thus far prevented further worsening of the situation.

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Summary information for "LEVEL*news*"

At the beginning of September, Lake Superior was 21 cm above the seasonal average, a condition brought on by the heavy snowmelt this past spring followed by a rather wet summer. About four cm of this water is due to flow limitations to accommodate the repairs at the Compensating Works. While the level at the beginning of September remained very high, it was 13 cm below the maximum recorded in October 1985. It appears that the lake's level has peaked for the year, and should start to decline during September, although further heavy rainfall could cause a slight rise in its level.

Repairs on the U.S. portion of the structure are expected to be completed by September 20. At that time, more gates will be opened to increase Lake Superior's outflow and help draw down the lake prior to the fall storm season.

Flows at the three hydro-power plants in the St. Marys River, which make up the largest portion of the St. Marys River flow, continued to be at their capacities.

Middle Lakes Reached Season's Peak

Lakes Huron, St. Clair and Erie appear to have peaked this year, at levels as much as 35 cm higher than average, and have begun to decline. Drier than average conditions during August, the first dry period in several months, helped to accelerate the drop of Lake Erie's level. A continued decline in the levels is expected the rest of the year, and serious flooding problems are unlikely through autumn.

Lake Ontario Level Declines Steadily

After reaching its peak in June some 20 cm above average, the level of Lake Ontario has been declining. With the high levels, the outflows of the lake during this past summer have also been significantly higher than average. The flows are expected to remain high as the lake was three cm above average at the beginning of September.

Montreal Harbour levels were well above chart datum in August, and are expected to remain well above datum for September.

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